LOS ANGELES TIMES
17 JAN 1974

STAT

DEAR PRAVDA

# Soviet Letters to the Editor—a Firm Hand

BY MURRAY SEEGER
Times Staff Writer

MOSCOW—How do you get your pet peeves and major complaints about life and its hardships off your chest in the world's most restricted society? You write a letter to the editor about them.

The nation's tightly controlled newspapers, magazines and radio and television networks are flooded daily with letters—many of them complaints about failures and violations in the system and many others praising the leadership.

The official Communist Party organ, Pravda, the nation's biggest newspaper, reports that 1,300 letters are received every day and 48 employes work full time dealing with them.

How many of the letters that the general public gets to read or hear about over the official networks are genuine and how many are planted by the official propagandists cannot be determined.

One of the most noted party commentators, Yuri Zhukov, for instance, reported recently over the nationwide television network that he had received "several hundred" letters denouncing the Nobel novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the nuclear physicist Andrei D. Sakharov for their dissident views. He did not explain how the letter-writers were so conversant with the current thoughts of the two most famous critics of the system, since none of their writings or statements have been reproduced by the Soviet media.

And when he was asked by Western newsmen, in an audience he granted to them a day after the broadcast, whether he had received any letters supporting Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov, he replied, "No, they are probably sent to the New York Times."

For the ordinary Soviet citizen who usually does not complain in public about major problems and almost never discusses politics, the letter to the editor [illegible]

One sent a letter complaining that he was searched as he left one of the new self-service grocery stores. He was incensed that an honest citizen should be treated as a shoplifter suspect. Another letter claimed that mail deliveries were too slow. Several urged a change in wage rates.

Some letters are answers to earlier messages asking for personal advice on dealing with unfaithful boyfriends and drunken fathers. Many are pleas for better public manners, better care of parks and more thoughtful treatment of pets and zoo animals.

All of these thoughts were included in recently published letters, providing the only amusing reading among the turgid political pronouncements and slanted reporting of overseas news.

The authorities permit a limited about of grousing about routine problems as a crude measure of public opinion, to let people release steamed-up emotions and to prod the inefficient bureaucracy. Some letters lead to official investigations.

A sharp line is drawn on political discussion and criticism. Only those letters that support official policies are printed.

"In a word, the ordinary worker, the ordinary reader has the opportunity of expressing through the mass media his views on different aspects of society and so bring influence to bear on them," a Soviet commentator said recently.

"This is a concrete illustration of the democratic nature of the Soviet press," he added.

Letters, usually inspired by propaganda workers, are also used to suggest massive public support for official policies.

The newspapers systematically print prominently a purported cross section of public letters in praise of Communist Party Chief Leonid I. Brezhnev, especially when he returns from an overseas meeting such as last spring's visit to the United States.

Such letters are often the result of prodding by local officials at party or shop meetings. And those well-informed letters attacking the as-yet unpublished views of Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov are often written [illegible] signed by faithful members.

Several years ago, a liberal Soviet editor tracked down a "worker" who had attacked him through the mail and found the real author was a high party official.

The party also writes the open letters used in campaigns against dissidents and tries to force prominent figures to sign them. In the recent campaign against Sakharov, for instance, composer Dimitri Shostakovich signed but cellist Mstislav Rostropovich did not. The name of violinist David Oistrakh appeared on the letter but he reportedly repudiated it since his name was attached without his knowledge when he was in a hospital.

There are lesser known correspondents whose views do not reflect the official points of view on sensitive issues, but they take great risks when they drop their letters into a postal box.

Four retired men in Leningrad were publicly humiliated after they were tracked down as the authors of a series of anonymous letters received by newspapers and broadcasting stations over a period of months.

"He wrote such enormous things that I could not raise my hand to repeat them," a reporter for the Leningradskaya Pravda wrote of one correspondent.

"Everybody knows that a person confessing hostile views will easily come to treason against the Soviet system, will get into the net of the enemy's secret service and become a traitor to his motherland."

The potential spy was 70-year-old P. M. Fafarov, described as a man with a "high education" who lives on a pension after working for the Leningrad Engineering Works.

The letter that got him into trouble said it was "our duty to help Israel in her defensive war against Arab extremists and nationalists."